

PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

Legal Division

San Francisco, California

Date: December 15, 2005

Resolution No. L-326

RESOLUTION

RESOLUTION AUTHORIZING DISCLOSURE OF COMMISSION CONSUMER PROTECTION AND SAFETY DIVISION (UTILITY SAFETY AND RELIABILITY BRANCH) INVESTIGATION RECORDS PURSUANT TO PUBLIC RECORDS ACT REQUEST BY MISHAEL T. CROFT, MICHAEL A. SALZMANN, AND BRADFORD A. BLAIS SEEKING DISCLOSURE OF COMMISSION STAFF INVESTIGATION RECORDS RELATING TO A JANUARY 9, 2003 ELECTRIC VAULT EXPLOSION AT EL MONTE RV ON FIRESTONE BOULEVARD IN SANTA FE SPRINGS. (INCIDENT NO. E20030109-01).

BACKGROUND

A letter dated March 19, 2004, from Mishael T. Croft, Human Resources Manager, El Monte RV, asked the California Public Utilities Commission (Commission) to provide records concerning the Commission's investigation of an electric incident on January 9, 2003 at El Monte RV, 12818 Firestone Blvd., Santa Fe Springs, California. Rafael Gutierrez and others were injured when an underground electric vault exploded. Commission staff provided the requester with a copy of the initial incident report filed by the utility regarding this incident, in accord with Commission Resolution L-272, but informed the requester that the Commission's investigation records could not be made public without the formal approval of the Commission. On June 9, 2004, Michael A. Salzmänn, with the State Compensation Insurance Fund, made a similar request and received a similar response. Neither Ms. Croft nor Mr. Salzmänn pursued the matter further through an appeal to the Commission for an order authorizing disclosure. On August 31, 2005, Bradford A. Blais, of the Law Offices of Gary A. Dordick, requested all reports related to the January 9, 2003 incident. Having received three requests for the same incident investigation records, it is appropriate for the Commission to issue an order responsive to these requests.

DISCUSSION

The requested records are “public records” as defined by the California Public Records Act (PRA). (Government Code § 6250 et seq.) The California Constitution, PRA, and discovery law, favor disclosure of public records. The public has a constitutional right to access government information. (California Constitution, Article 1, § 3 (a).) Statutes, court rules, and other authority limiting access to information must be broadly construed if they further the people’s right of access, and narrowly construed if they limit the right of access. (California Constitution, Article 1, § 3 (b)(2).) New statutes, court rules, or other authority that limit the right of access must be adopted with findings demonstrating the interest protected by the limitation and the need to protect that interest. (Id.)

The PRA provides that a an agency must base a decision to withhold a public record in response to a PRA request upon the specified exemptions listed in the Act, or a showing that, on the facts of a particular case, the public interest in confidentiality clearly outweighs the public interest in disclosure.¹

The Commission has exercised its discretion under Public Utilities Code § 583, and implemented its responsibility under Government Code § 6253.4 (a), by adopting guidelines for public access to Commission records. These guidelines are embodied in General Order 66-C. General Order 66-C § 1.1 provides that Commission records are public, except “as otherwise excluded by this General Order, statute, or other order, decision, or rule.” General Order 66-C, § 2.2 precludes staff’s disclosure of “[r]ecords or information of a confidential nature furnished to or obtained by the Commission ... including: (a) Records of investigations and audits made by the Commission, except to the extent disclosed at a hearing or by formal Commission action.” Section 2.2 (a) covers both records provided by utilities in the course of a Commission investigation and investigation records generated by Commission staff.

Because General Order 66-C § 2.2 (a) limits staff’s ability to disclose Commission investigation records in the absence of disclosure during a hearing or a Commission order authorizing disclosure, staff denies most initial requests for investigation records. Staff usually informs requesters of the option under General Order 66-C § 3.4 to appeal to the Commission for disclosure of the records. If an appeal is received, staff prepares a draft resolution for the Commission’s consideration.

¹ The fact that records may fall within a PRA exemption does not preclude the Commission from authorizing disclosure of the records. Except for records which may not be disclosed by law, PRA exemptions are discretionary, rather than mandatory, and the Commission is free to refrain from asserting such exemptions when it finds that disclosure is appropriate. See Government Code § 6253 (e); *Black Panthers v. Kehoe* (1974) 42 Cal. App.3d 645, 656.

There is no statute forbidding disclosure of the Commission's safety investigation records. During the past twelve years the Commission has ordered disclosure of records concerning completed safety incident investigations on numerous occasions.² Disclosure does not interfere with its investigations, and may lead to discovery of admissible evidence and aid in the resolution of litigation regarding the accident/incident under investigation.³ Most of these resolutions responded to disclosure requests and/or subpoenas from individuals involved in electric or gas utility incidents (accidents), the families of such individuals, the legal representatives of such individuals or families, or the legal representatives of a defendant, or potential defendant, in litigation related to an accident/incident.

Portions of incident investigation records which include personal information may be subject to disclosure limitations in the Information Practices Act (IPA) (Civil Code § 1798 et seq.). However, the IPA authorizes disclosure of personal information "Pursuant to the California Public Records Act." (Civil Code § 1798.24 (g).)

The only personal information in the records requested here consists of references to the identity of Commission staff and other government employees investigating the incident; the identity of utility employees reporting or investigating the incident, or inspecting utility facilities; El Monte RV employees; and the lawyers requesting the records. While the PRA exempts personal information from mandatory disclosure, where disclosure would constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy (Government Code § 6254 (c)), no information in the current incident investigation file requires redaction.

The Commission has often stated that Public Utilities Code § 315, which expressly prohibits the introduction of accident reports filed with the Commission, or orders and recommendations issued by the Commission, "as evidence in any action for damages based on or arising out of such loss of life, or injury to person or property," offers utilities sufficient protection against injury caused by the release of requested investigation records.

COMMENTS ON DRAFT RESOLUTION:

The Draft Resolution of the Legal Division in this matter was mailed to the parties in interest on November 9, 2005, in accordance with Public Utilities Code § 311(g)91) and

² Where appropriate, the Commission has redacted portions of investigation records which contain confidential personal information, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy, and other exempt or privileged information.

³ See, e.g. Commission Resolutions L-240 *Re San Diego Gas & Electric Company*, rehearing denied in D.90-05-020 (1993), 49 CPUC 2d 241; L-309 *Re Corona* (December 18, 2003); and L-320 *Re Knutson* (August 25, 2005).

Rule 77.7 of the Rules of Practice and Procedure. Comments were filed on _____ by _____.

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Commission received three letters seeking disclosure of Commission investigation records concerning an electric incident that injured Rafael Gutierrez and others on January 9, 2003 in Santa Fe Springs, California. An initial Incident Report submitted by the utility was provided to two requesters, but access to the remaining records in the investigation file was denied in the absence of a Commission order authorizing disclosure. Subsequently, a third individual requested all reports relative to the incident.
2. The Commission's investigation of the January 9, 2003 accident is closed; therefore, the disclosure of the investigation records would not compromise the investigation.
3. The public interest favors disclosure of the requested investigation records.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

1. The documents in the requested investigation file and report are public records as defined by Government Code § 6250 et seq.
2. The California Constitution favors disclosure of governmental records by, among other things, stating that the people have the right of access to information concerning the conduct of the peoples' business, and therefore, the meetings of public bodies and the writings of public officials and agencies shall be open to public scrutiny. Furthermore, the California Constitution also requires that statutes, court rules, and other authority favoring disclosure be broadly construed, and that statutes, court rules, and other authority limiting disclosure be construed narrowly; and that any new statutes, court rules, or other authority limiting disclosure be supported by findings determining the interest served by keeping information from the public and the need to protect that interest. California Constitution, Article 1, § 3 (b) (1) and (2).
3. The general policy of the Public Records Act favors disclosure of records.
4. Justification for withholding a public record in response to a Public Records Act request must be based on specific exemptions in the Public Records Act or upon a showing that, on the facts of a particular case, the public interest in nondisclosure clearly outweighs the public interest in disclosure. (Government Code § 6255.)

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5. The Commission has exercised its discretion under Public Utilities Code § 583 to limit staff disclosure of investigation records in the absence of formal action by the Commission or disclosure during the course of a Commission proceeding. (General Order 66-C § 2.2 (a).)
6. Public Utilities Code § 583 does not limit the Commission's ability to order disclosure of records.
7. Public Utilities Code § 315 prohibits the introduction of accident reports filed with the Commission, or orders and recommendations issued by the Commission, "as evidence in any action for damages based on or arising out of such loss of life, or injury to person or property."

ORDER

1. The requests for disclosure of the Commission's records concerning the investigation of a January 9, 2003 electric incident which injured Rafael Gutierrez and others when an underground electric vault exploded at El Monte RV on Firestone Blvd. in Santa Fe Springs, California, are granted.
2. The effective date of this order is today.

I certify that this Resolution was adopted by the Public Utilities Commission at its regular meeting of December 15, 2005 and that the following Commissioners approved it:

STEPHEN LARSON
Executive Director